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| Jook House |
| Jook Joint |
| The jook house (also juke joint), an African-American institution found mainly in semi-urban areas in the Southern United States, is an important cultural phenomenon that emerged in the decades after emancipation (1862). While the conditions of slavery in the South made it difficult and often illegal for black men and women to gather without white intervention, during the period of reconstruction, jook houses became a place for newly freed men and women (usually from the lower and working classes) to drink, gamble, listen to music, and dance. While the precise etymology of ‘jook’ is unclear, some scholars suggest the term comes from the Bambara word ‘dzugu’, which means ‘wicked’ or from the Bamana-Kam word ‘dugu’, which means ‘bad’. The jook house as ‘bad’ or ‘wicked’ articulates its covert and subversive qualities, as well as its ability to transgress white codes of conduct and social life. These jook houses gave birth to the musical style of the blues, saw an increased blending of regional African-American dance practices, and nurtured an emerging modern black identity. |
| Summary The jook house (also juke joint), an African-American institution found mainly in semi-urban areas in the Southern United States, is an important cultural phenomenon that emerged in the decades after emancipation (1862). While the conditions of slavery in the South made it difficult and often illegal for black men and women to gather without white intervention, during the period of reconstruction, jook houses became a place for newly freed men and women (usually from the lower and working classes) to drink, gamble, listen to music, and dance. While the precise etymology of ‘jook’ is unclear, some scholars suggest the term comes from the Bambara word ‘dzugu’, which means ‘wicked’ or from the Bamana-Kam word ‘dugu’, which means ‘bad’. The jook house as ‘bad’ or ‘wicked’ articulates its covert and subversive qualities, as well as its ability to transgress white codes of conduct and social life. These jook houses gave birth to the musical style of the blues, saw an increased blending of regional African-American dance practices, and nurtured an emerging modern black identity. Contributions to the Field and to Modernism Unlike the exclusive European-inspired balls of black elites, or church gatherings that often restricted the use of dance, the jook house became a place to gather in small towns and cities where secular African-American dance and music developed. In this setting, many West African-influenced artistic practices that were repressed during slavery were revived. However, unlike their African predecessors, the dances in jook houses were more often for couples rather than for groups, and were less for religious purposes and more for social interaction and entertainment. Dances found in jook houses included upbeat dances like the Charleston (a rhythmic kicking step done with the twisting of the feet), and downtempo dances like the slow drag (a partner dance featuring a tight embrace and hip movement). Musically, the blues style proliferated in this environment and songs developed hundreds of variations as musicians travelled from one jook house to the next. Ragtime and early jazz could also be heard in jook houses. The peak of the jook house was during Reconstruction and before the mass migration North and West, although versions of jook houses existed in many cities there as well. The Honky-Tonk and the After-Hours Joint were both types of urban jook houses.  The jook house was a space where modern black dance and music could develop freely, often exhibiting a more secular and urban character than what had preceeded it. This new music and dance in turn came to define a newly developing modern black identity. ‘Musically speaking’, wrote author Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) in 1933, ‘the Jook is the most important place in America. For in its smelly, shoddy confines has been born the secular music known as blues, and on blues has been founded jazz. The singing and playing in the true Negro style is called ‘jooking’’. The dances and music of the jook house would be featured in black theatrical productions in the early twentieth century (like *Darktown Follies* and *Shuffle Along*) and an inspiration for artists of the Harlem Renaissance (especially musicians, dancers, and authors). Though the popularity of the jook house declined in the twentieth century, many modern social institutions, especially the nightclub and cabaret, have roots in the jook house and its traditions. Paratextual Materials: Crevar, Alex. ‘Driving the Juke Joint Trail.’ *New York Times*, May 17, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/travel/driving-the-juke-joint-trail.html?hpw&\_r=1&>  This online article includes a video of contemporary jook houses still open and running today.  Gates, Henry Louis, Nellie Y. McKay (eds.) et al. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* W. W. Norton and Company, 2012.  <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/africanamericanlit2e/glossary.aspx?Active=03>  This website provides definitions for terms related to African-American literature and cultural practices and has an image of an early jook joint. |
| Further reading:  (Emery)  (Glass)  (Hazzard-Gordon)  (Hurston)  (Lauterbach)  (Pearson)  (Stearns and Stearns) |